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How the CMA (AAMA) stands apart

A comparison of four medical assisting certifications

Medical assisting continues to be listed among the fastest growing occupations in the country, according to the United States Department of Labor, Bureau of Labor Statistics. “Job opportunities should be excellent, particularly for those with formal training or experience, and certification.”¹ But, what constitutes adequate education and certification? The following provides a scan of the occupational landscape and a comparison of four medical assisting certifications.

Atmosphere of confusion

As demand for medical assistants has grown, medical assisting training programs have appeared with ever increasing rapidity, and often with questionable quality and scope of education. In addition, proliferation of certifications for medical assistants—and even confusion with credentials of other allied health professions—has made it difficult for employers to determine which medical assistants will best help them deliver high-quality patient care.

Further muddying the waters are the different types of testing bodies with widely varying requirements for eligibility, testing, and recertification. The uninformed employer might believe that one medical assisting credential is as good as another and quickly develop a skewed perspective on the profession.

Comparison of four certifications

When it comes to medical assisting credentials, employers are gradually learning to identify the certifications that indicate some meaningful level of quality. Please note that the four credentials discussed in this article vary significantly.

Organizational differences

The American Association of Medical Assistants (AAMA) and American Medical Technologists (AMT) are not-for-profit organizations. The AAMA is devoted exclusively to the medical assisting profession; AMT also serves other allied health professions.

The National Healthcareer Association (NHA) and the National Center for Competency Testing (NCCT) are for-profit organizations that serve many allied health professions.

Certification sponsoring organization			
American Association of Medical Assistants	American Medical Technologists	National Healthcareer Association	National Center for Competency Testing
Not-for-profit	Not-for-profit	For-profit	For-profit
AAMA certifies medical assistants exclusively	AMT certifies several allied health professions	NHA certifies several allied health professions	NCCT certifies several allied health professions
CMA (AAMA) Certified Medical Assistant of the AAMA First CMA (AAMA) exam offered: 1963	RMA(AMT) Registered Medical Assistant of AMT First RMA exam offered: 1972	CCMA Certified Clinical Medical Assistant First CCMA exam offered: 1989	NCMA National Certified Medical Assistant First NCMA exam offered: 1989

Exam eligibility

AAMA	AMT	NHA	NCCT
CMA (AAMA)	RMA (AMT)	CCMA	NCMA
<p>One pathway:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Successful completion of a medical assisting program accredited by the Commission on Accreditation of Allied Health Education Programs (CAAHEP) or the Accrediting Bureau of Health Education Schools (ABHES), including a practicum of at least 160 hours <p><i>Three attempts are allowed to pass the exam for initial certification.</i></p> <p><i>Individuals graduating after January 1, 2010, have up to 60 months to take and pass the exam. If these requirements are not met, the candidate forfeits the opportunity to become a CMA (AAMA).</i></p>	<p>Five pathways:</p> <p>Applicant shall be a recent graduate of, or scheduled to graduate from:</p> <p>A. A medical assistant program that holds programmatic accreditation by (or is in a postsecondary school or college that holds institutional accreditation by) the Accrediting Bureau of Health Education Schools (ABHES) or the Commission on Accreditation of Allied Health Education Programs (CAAHEP), or</p> <p>B. A medical assistant program in a post-secondary school or college that has institutional accreditation by a regional accrediting commission or by a national accrediting organization approved by the U.S. Department of Education, which includes a minimum of 720 clock-hours (or equivalent) of training in medical assisting skills (including a clinical externship of no less than 160 hours in duration), or</p> <p>C. A formal medical services training program of the United States Armed Forces.</p> <p><i>For routes A, B, or C, if the applicant graduated within the last four years, proof of work experience is not required. If graduated over four years ago, proof of current work experience is required.</i></p> <p>D. Applicant shall have been employed in the profession of medical assisting for a minimum of five years, no more than two years of which may have been as an instructor in the postsecondary medical assistant program (proof of current work experience and high school education or equivalent are required). Employment dates must be within the last five years.</p> <p>E. Applicant has passed a generalist medical assistant certification examination offered by another medical assisting certification agency (provided that exam has been approved for this purpose by the AMT Board of Directors) and who have been working in the medical assisting field for the past three out of five years and who has met all other AMT training and experience requirements (no further examination required).</p>	<p>Two pathways:</p> <p>Applicants must be at least 18 and have a high school diploma (or equivalent), as well as one of the following:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Successful completion of an allied health training program within the past year; or One year of medical assisting employment, and employment as a medical assistant within the last year. 	<p>Two pathways:</p> <p>Applicants must have a high school diploma (or equivalent), as well as one of the following:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Graduation from an NCCT approved medical assisting program within the last 10 years; or Two years of qualifying full-time employment (4,160 hours) or equivalent part-time employment as a medical assistant within the last 10 years.

Note: Further specifications and restrictions may apply. Contact sponsoring organizations for details.

Recertification requirements

CMA (AAMA)	RMA(AMT)	CCMA	NCMA
60 CE hours every 60 months in the three required categories, or recertification by exam	<p>For individuals certified on or after January 1, 2006, 30 points every three years.</p> <p>Individuals certified prior to January 1, 2006 (except individuals initially certified prior to January 1, 2006, but who are reinstating after three years of inactive status), are NOT required to participate; however, AMT strongly encourages all members to keep abreast in their field through education and other professional activities. Points can be earned through traditional continuing education, satisfactory employment in the field, formal education, professional education, authoring written works, instructional presentations, and organizational participation.</p>	10 CE hours—acquired from NHA—every two years	14 CE hours every year
All CMAs (AAMA) recertifying by continuing education must submit an application, with documentation of the required 60 recertification points (at least 10 in General, 10 in Administrative, and 10 in Clinical categories). Staff will review each application, and will notify the applicant whether the total number of recertification points, and the requirement of at least 10 points in each of the General, Administrative, and Clinical categories has been met, and whether the documentation is sufficient. If an application does not meet the recertification requirements, the CMA (AAMA) will be required to submit the necessary documentation.	Every three years, affected members will receive a notification regarding Certification Continuation Program (CCP) compliance and will be asked to attest to attaining the required number of points. No documentation will need to be submitted to AMT on an ongoing basis. However, each year AMT will perform a random audit. Those who are chosen for an audit must produce documentation to support the certification continuation activities attested to. Certified members who do not meet CCP requirements, or those who are audited and do not provide supporting documentation, are considered “Non Compliant” and will have their membership and certification revoked.	N/A	N/A
<p>A CMA (AAMA) cannot use the credential if it is not current.</p> <p>CMAs (AAMA) whose credential is not current for more than 60 months must take the CMA (AAMA) Certification Examination to regain currency.</p>	<p>If certification has lapsed longer than five years, but less than 10, the RMA(AMT)—in addition to the other recertification requirements—must submit proof of successfully completing a refresher course (live or online).</p> <p>If certification has lapsed longer than 10 years, the RMA (AMT) must recertify via examination.</p>	<p>Certification no longer valid if not reinstated within two years.</p> <p>If certification expires, 10 CE credits and payment of the two-year recertification fee are required. A reinstatement fee must also be paid.</p>	<p>Certification status becomes noncurrent if lapsed for one year. A certificant can renew by completing required CE hours and paying the fees. If not renewed for three years, all past due fees and CE hours must be submitted to become current.</p> <p>Certification revoked if five or more years have lapsed. The certificant must retake the exam to become certified again.</p>

Note: Further specifications and restrictions may apply. Contact sponsoring organizations for details.

Exam eligibility

Exam eligibility requirements also vary greatly. The CMA (AAMA), for instance, is the only medical assisting credential that requires formal medical assisting education. Exam candidates must graduate from a postsecondary medical assisting program accredited by either the Commission on Accreditation of Allied Health Education Programs (CAAHEP) or the Accrediting Bureau of Health Education Schools (ABHES). These two accrediting bodies provide programmatic accreditation for medical assisting programs, which means that the program itself undergoes rigorous scrutiny and standardized approval processes.

American Medical Technologists offers five different eligibility pathways, one of which is graduation from a CAAHEP or ABHES accredited program. The other four eligibility pathways are specified in the “Exam eligibility” chart.

Exam eligibility requirements for the NHA and NCCT are similar to each other. Candidates must have a high school diploma (or equivalent) and have: (1) a certain amount of educational training; or (2) employment experience. For the education pathway, the NHA does not specify any accreditation standards, while the NCCT requires graduation from an NCCT approved medical assisting program. For the experiential pathway, the NHA requires a minimum one year of medical assisting employment, and employment as a medical assistant within the last year; the NCCT requires two years of qualifying full-time employment (4,160 hours) or equivalent part-time employment as a medical assistant within the last 10 years.

The Certifying Board of the AAMA has established further testing requirements to ensure that the CMA (AAMA) designation represents competent and knowledgeable medical assistants. Candidates are allowed up to three

attempts to pass the exam for initial certification. To help ensure “freshness of knowledge,” CMA (AAMA) candidates graduating on or after January 1, 2010, have up to 60 months to take and pass the exam.

While the CMA (AAMA) Certification Examination is the only exam that is limited to graduates of CAAHEP and ABHES accredited programs, CMAs (AAMA) are also the only allied health professionals who have passed a standardized examination for which the National Board of Medical Examiners (NBME) serves as test consultant. Worth noting, too, is that the NBME is responsible for the United States Medical Licensure Examination (USMLE) and many physician specialty examinations. The CMA (AAMA) Certification Examination, therefore, meets the highest standards of reliability and validity.

Recertification requirements

Employers want to be assured their staff members are remaining knowledgeable and prepared as the health care climate rapidly changes. CMAs (AAMA) are required to recertify every 60 months to use the credential. They may recertify either by passing the CMA (AAMA) Certification Examination, or by acquiring 60 hours of continuing education in the required categories over the five-year period. If a CMA’s (AAMA) credential is not current for more than 60 months, the CMA (AAMA) must take the CMA (AAMA) Certification Examination in order to recertify.

Recertification by continuing education for each of the four medical assisting credentials can vary in terms of how many hours of continuing education are required and how often medical assistants are required to recertify. (See “Recertification requirements” chart.)

Comprehensive recertification for CMAs (AAMA)

It is vitally important that medical assistants continue to be knowledgeable about all aspects of the profession, not just the areas in which they work. The CMA (AAMA) is the only one of the four certifications that requires a minimum number of points in the general, administrative, and clinical areas of medical assisting to recertify by continuing education.

The CMA (AAMA) proudly stands apart

The CMA (AAMA) stands out for its strict adherence to the highest standards of post-secondary education, examination administration, and recertification requirements. Growing numbers of employers are now beginning to demand evidence of CMA (AAMA) certification status. Employers contact the AAMA directly to ensure medical assistant employees or job candidates are CMAs (AAMA). In order to meet this increasing demand, the AAMA instituted an online service at <http://www.aama-ntl.org/employers/verify.aspx> that allows employers to quickly access the information any time. The AAMA staff now conducts verifications of over 100 medical assistants daily. These employers are well aware of how distinctly the CMA (AAMA) stands apart from the rest. ◀

References

1. US Bureau of Labor Statistics. Occupational Outlook Handbook, 2010–11 Edition: Medical Assistants. <http://www.bls.gov/oco/ocos164.htm>. Updated December 17, 2009. Accessed June 6, 2011.
2. Balasa DA. The CMA (AAMA) advantage: how the PCMH practice can benefit. *CMA Today*. 2010;43(2):7. <http://www.aama-ntl.org/CMAToday/archives/publicaffairs/details.aspx?ArticleID=728>. Accessed June 6, 2011.

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